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The Murky Core of the Spy Business

By David Ignatius

"Let's get on with it."

According to Thomas Powers in his new book, "The Man Who Kept the Secrets," that phrase was characteristic of Richard Helms, former director of Central Intelligence. The pragmatic Mr. Helms, as his biographer makes clear, had little use for spy fantasies. And if the CIA director's pragmatism makes him appear, in retrospect, something of a bureaucrat, it also helped him remain a sane and reasonable man in a business that drove many of his colleagues to distraction.

Anyone who has tried, like Mr. Powers, to plumb the murky depths of the spy world is likely to come to a similar view: Let's get on with it. The conundrums of intelligence are so strange and seductive that they leave the investigator unprepared for the greatest secret of all: At the core of intelligence—instead of the hard rock of fact—there often is only the vaporous mist of uncertainty.

A CIA agent disappears in Vienna, and four years later, an attorney working almost full-time on the case, with abundant help from the CIA, is still uncertain whether the man is dead or alive; whether he's in the hands of the Russians, or somewhere else.

Another former CIA agent sits nervously in his living room, chain-smoking, as he insists to a reporter that no matter what Soviet defectors may have told the CIA about him, he isn't a Soviet double agent. Is he lying? It takes months to realize that nobody at the CIA or the FBI really knows.

Such intrigues of espionage, and the bureaucratic infighting that inevitably accompanied them, swept up many of Mr. Helms's fellow intelligence officers. Frank Wisner, for example, was a fabled CIA officer who directed the agency's clandestine service during the 1950s. Between Mr. Wisner's jaunts abroad to help topple governments, his wife would host the most elegant dinner parties in Washington. Mr. Wisner worked himself into a nervous breakdown, and he finally killed himself with a shotgun in 1965.

The intelligence business, and the infighting, also took a toll on William Sullivan. Mr. Sullivan headed the FBI's counterintelligence operations for many years, rose to become the No. 3 man at the Bureau, and finally left in 1971 after a bitter feud with then-director J. Edgar Hoover. Mr. Sullivan's mental torments are clear between the lines of "The Bureau," a book he drafted before his death in a hunting accident in 1977.

Mr. Sullivan's book spills some secrets about the spy business, such as his suspicion that the Russians placed a penetration agent within the FBI's New York office. And Mr. Sullivan apparently spilled many more in conversations with reporters: names and events came bubbling out of him from that murky core of intelligence—all tinged with the venom of Mr. Sullivan's hatred for his former boss, Mr. Hoover. To read Mr. Sullivan's book is to see a thoughtful man humbled by the need to avenge past injuries to his pride and justify his every action—even at the cost of revealing the secrets he struggled so long to protect.

Not so Richard Helms. His conduct, at the CIA and in retirement, seemed to echo that terse advice of the Duchess of Windsor: "Never explain; never complain." He let others travel the world during the agency's glory days, running secret armies and organizing coups. And he let others wrangle over what Mr. Powers calls the "epistemological" questions of intelligence—the study of how we know things about the enemy.

Mr. Helms was a manager. He saw his job as taking the heat—for Presidents and the dirty work that lay behind their grand international designs, and for the sometimes-crazy schemes of his subordinates at the CIA. Richard Helms protected them all.

This managerial commitment to secrecy ultimately got Mr. Helms into serious legal trouble. In 1970, he had been ordered by President Nixon to prevent, by whatever means necessary, the election of Salvador Allende as President of Chile; when questioned about the resulting covert campaign by a Senate committee in 1973, he lied. Later, in the new world of government ethics that had been created by Watergate, Mr. Helms pleaded no contest to a criminal charge stemming from this false testimony.

Mr. Powers takes a basically sympathetic view toward the CIA. He believes that the U.S. needs a spy service, and that a spy service is useless unless it can protect its secrets. Thus his respect for Mr. Helms, who surely must be flattered by the title Mr. Powers chose for his book.

Mr. Powers writes with the precision of a former wire-service reporter, but he's also capable of stunning, lyrical passages about some of the CIA's darker chapters. His book is a pleasure to read, and it is without question the best introduction to the CIA (whose brief, 30-year history is encompassed almost completely within Mr. Helms's career) that has yet been written.

Mr. Sullivan's meandering book, in contrast, should be skipped. It adds a few new details to the history of Mr. Hoover's autocratic regime at the FBI, but little to a reader's understanding of why such terrible things were allowed to happen. (The answer, in part, is surely that for decades, men like Mr. Sullivan were afraid to speak out.)

In assessing Mr. Helms and his role as the protector of American Presidents, Mr. Powers reaches two important conclusions. First, he argues that in the few instances where the CIA attempted to assassinate foreign leaders, it did so on orders from U.S. Presidents or with their knowledge. Second, he contends that Richard Helms was fired by President Nixon in 1973 because he refused to allow Mr. Nixon to use the CIA to cover up the Watergate scandal.

Mr. Powers offers considerable evidence to support these arguments; but interestingly, none of it appears to have come from Mr. Helms himself. The former CIA director, it seems, is still keeping the secrets and protecting Presidents—even at the cost of his own reputation.

Mr. Ignatius writes about intelligence matters for the Journal's Washington bureau.

The Bookshelf

"The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI"
By William C. Sullivan with Bill Brown. W. W. Norton & Co. 286 pages. $12.95.

"The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA"
By Thomas Powers. Alfred A. Knopf. 393 pages. $12.95.